

**ISSN** INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
**ISSN-2321-7065**

**IJELLH**

# **International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



**Volume 7, Issue 2, February 2019**

[www.ijellh.com](http://www.ijellh.com)

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Voicing the devoiced: A Stratagem in the feminist perspective through Gita Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*

Abstract: Women in the Indian society have always lived under the protection of husband or children. In scriptures and myths, woman is depicted either as a Goddess or a sub-human creator, never as a complete human being. On one hand, she is treated like an object of reverence or worship and on the other; she is treated like an object of sexual gratification and considered as man's property. Writers, philosophers and thinkers of all ages have striven to show that the subordinate position of women is willed in heaven and advantageous on earth. The post-modern, post-colonial females focus their attention in the need to liberate the self from all traditional structures. They try to reconstruct a new history and carved the voiced out of the voiceless. The excavation of the traditional traits from the debris of modernity is also a part of the postmodern discourse. So this paper reflects the shift in moral values of the protagonists, the social transition, changing attitudes and also problems arising out of the generation gap and an attempt to make sense of their lives and find a pattern in the past and a direction in the future. All are in the process of revealing their experiences and in fact reassuring themselves that they are not helpless but yet are doubly marginalized. The roles into which they ultimately fit themselves are stereotypes.

Key words: traits, postmodern discourse, marginalized, stereotypes.

## Introduction

Indian women accomplish new heights to mark their presence in every sphere of life either considered to be essentially male domain. In spite of the lesser representation in politics and confining gender construct, the headlines of the newspaper suggest that the women has now come out of the four walls of the house to assert her 'self' in academics, politics, sports, cinema. They have realized their strength to convert the challenges into opportunities and the success relies on the moral, psychological, social and individual development. The postmodern movement, emerges in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and encourages the idea of re-examining of every aspect of existence, from commerce to philosophy, with the goal of finding the past and replacing it with better realities reaching the same end. All narratives move in at least two directions at once towards recovering the past and towards being heard or told. Woman experiences a perpetual conflict between traditional modes of life which ensures that she is safely engross within her home, engage in managing the household and the family matters throughout her life, and adopting a modern outlook with its promise of individualism, mobility and permissiveness. Modern fiction by women writers explores the conflict between tradition and modernity and the influence on the lives of women caught up within this conflict. Attitude towards history and myth is that it happens not only in the earlier real life or imagination but also something that forms an inalienable part of the present and makes us conscious, as T.S.Eliot in his essay 'Traditional and Individual Talent' emphasizes, "not only of the pastness of the past but of its presence" (38).

Feminism is a recurring theme in the works of the contemporary writers, most of the characters especially protagonists are women. Many of them are living in a very patriarchy society and yet trying to define themselves, to find a niche for themselves, a space to call their own, a voice to express their feelings and a wish to fulfil their potential as human

beings. In her introduction to *A Vindication of the Right of Women* (1792), Wollstonecraft demands that women should be treated as human beings:

Dismissing, then, those pretty feminine phrases, which the men  
condescendingly use to soften our slavish dependence, and despising that  
weak elegance of mind, exquisite sensibility, and sweet docility of manners,  
supposed to be the sexual characteristics of the weaker Vessel, I wish to show  
that elegance is inferior to virtue that the first object of laudable ambition  
obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex and  
that secondary views should be brought to this simple touchstone.

(Wollstonecraft 82)

Gita Hariharan unpompously broke the so called traditional concept of voiceless life of women and decoded with the postmodern perspective of the voiced by stressing on the different strategies women adopt to assert themselves. She has subtly summarises the effects of the strong winds of change that have brought about far reaching upheavals in women's lives. She demonstrates through her works that an enormous weight of tradition continues to bear down as a source of silence and inner ferment. India is a land where tradition is mingled with the lives of the people and women are the subjects of tradition. They are caught in the nexus of tradition and value and they suffer in all the walks of life especially in the Indian families. Women are harassed and humiliated by the partial codes and ethics designed by men. The codes are partial because they do not restrict men and because of these codes women have to sacrifice their wishes which cause existential dilemma in their minds. Devi in *TFN* cannot conform to the traditional concepts of India like marriage. She feels affectionate by the mother daughter relationship.

The opening of the novel strikes the keynote of the cardinal problem, that is, the conditioning of a girl child. Women, especially mothers and grandmothers always encourage their daughters to follow stereotypes. Devi's grandmother's stories narrated to her were "a prelude to my womanhood, an initiation into its subterranean possibilities" (51). The stories of Gandhari, Damayanti and Amba are symbolic of self-sacrifice, ironically, bring out the victimisation of these symbolic, timeless characters. Today also these stories become cliché for the women. Grandmothers stories of "predestined husband and idyllic marriages" (16) which Devi's mother, Sita, also "fed and stoked" (16) before Devi's meeting with prospective grooms, are pointers to the emblems of womanhood handed over by tradition. These stories and their morals are narrated to prepare her for role as an ideal wife, imbibing the qualities of self-sacrifice, empathy, tolerance and nurturing.

Devi's mother Sita, married at twenty and goes to her in laws house having a "resolve to be the perfect wife and daughter-in-law" (36). In order to maintain harmony and fulfill her endeavour to be a perfect wife and daughter-in-law, she has to pay a price. One thing that she loved playing was her veena and she equated her "self-worth so completely in terms of her music" (136). Once when her father-in-law could not find something he needed while he sat in front of the Gods for his morning prayer and also found that the floor had not been swept and flowers had not been picked, he roared at her, "put that veena away. Are you a wife, a daughter-in-law?" (30). This was a call for traditional self-sacrifice. It is a virtue expected of women, but it complicates their life for "the ethic of self-sacrifice is directly in conflict with the concept of rights of women" (Gilligan 132). Sita, in frustrating fury, burns all her photographs in which she poses with her veena and snaps its strings and "built a wall of reticence around herself" (136). She cuts herself off from "her own mother, father, the gurus of her childhood" (103) along with the veena and she writes to them "the occasional duty

dictated letter” (103) but never visits them. This was done to avoid “obsolete memories” (104). After this she becomes “a dutiful daughter-in-law the neighbours praised.”(30).

By Sita’s silence she punishes the people around her, who notice and find her silence synonymous with the quietness of the strings of the veena. Her silently seething rebellion paves her way from an average woman to a rich lady though it is through her husband, whom she inspires to move upward. In the end of the novel, Sita turn victorious, her house reflects the faint sounds of veena, which indicates that the old Sita emerges like a phoenix, embracing her true self. Mayamma’s sufferings “exemplify the inflexible constraints that identify a woman with the undesirable attributes of ‘dependence’, ‘passivity’ and ‘masochism’” (Nair 77-78). Like traditional women, she attributes her suffering to her fate and bears the physical and emotional violence at the hands of her mother-in-law in union with her son. She does not exhibit courage; rather, she takes responsibility to look after her husband’s mother and his son, while he runs away. After her son’s death, Mayamma seeks shelter at the altar of Parvatiamma, unable to forget her long about suffering. In the case of Devi, neglected by her husband, she rebels and negates care for morality. She refuses to suffer silently like a traditional woman and opts for the extreme step of walking out of her marriage. She elopes with Gopal, the musician brother of her neighbour: “It is less for love than to show her rage of rejection of a demeaning marriage that had crushed dignity, individual aspiration and mocked her emotional imaginative refinement” (Kundu 120). Unable to find satisfaction and self-fulfilment with Gopal, she returns to her mother to take refuge in her love. Her return to her mother shows her need to feel nurtured and also to nurture.

During childhood Sita does not over-indulged herself in bringing up Devi. She chiselled her with an iron will and iron hand to be complaint and adaptive, but Devi shows the signs of rebellion by taking flights of fancy, imagining herself to be a strong woman: “I

lived a secret life of my own. I became a woman warrior, a heroine. I was Devi. I rode a tiger, and cut off evil, magic demons' heads" (41). Though Devi rebels, her need to be in a relationship remains primary. She leaves her boyfriend, Dan, in order to save her relationship with her mother. Later on, she leaves Mahesh for Gopal to create a strong bond based on the reciprocal care, which her marriage lacked utterly. Leaving Gopal on realising the futility of their lusty relationship, she heads for her mother. Sita feels proud of her daughter in front of her relatives, who had warned her with "illustrative stories of boys and girls who never came back" (14). She states with an air of pride: "She is different, she is special, but she is just as pliant as your homegrown daughters" (15). Wishing a smooth and happy life for Devi, she chooses Mahesh from amongst many prospective bridegrooms and with "limpid eyed blessing" (22), she parts with her daughter.

Devi empathizes with her mother for her strong resistance to patriarchy when she broke her veena to satisfy her in-laws. But her sacrifice was never the sacrifice of the weak. It has the force of a revolt. Uma, Devi's cousin is gravely wronged by her husband and molested by her father-in-law. She resigns herself to her fate and leads a life devoid of happiness. Mayamma, the house keeper at Mahesh's house, suffers psychological and physical violence. Her husband hits, slaps, kicks, beats and indulges in non- consensual sexual activity. Unable to bear a child her agony is enhanced by her indifferent husband, "walk her up ever night, his large, hairy thighs rough and heavy on her, pushing," (80). She doesn't even have the liberty to hum a tune while doing her household chores. Once she is reminded of a song her mother used to sing, she hums the tune while making a 'kolam'. Her husband, like a tyrant, kicks her on her bent bottom, saying, "So you've taken to singing in the streets, have you, you shameless hussy?" (111). Most women embrace the traditional image of the ideal woman and totally efface their selfhood in favour of their spouses. They are similar to the kind of women Ruth Prawar Jhabvala illustrates: "Beat them, starve them,



and maltreat them how you like, they will sit and look with animal eyes and never raise a hand to defend themselves ...” (Iyengar 41-42). They do not show any reaction or rebellion, but remain silent and subdued.

Like most men Devi’s husband, Mahesh harbors the image of a traditional woman in his mind. He not only fails to read his wife’s dejection and subsequent depression, but is also emotionally inaccessible to her due to professional compulsions. The professional demands of frequent tours and long working hours stifle his interest in his wife and home. Devi finds herself a victim of a loveless marriage. Finding herself stifled by pressures of loneliness and her incapability to reconcile to the indifferent attitude of her husband, she records: “The sacrificial knife, marriage, hung a few inches above my neck for years, I had learnt to love, to covet my tormentor... this then is marriage, the end of ends, two or three brief encounters a month when bodies stutter together in lazy, inarticulate lust ... My education has left me unprepared for the vast, yawning middle chapters of my womanhood (54).

Devi fails to conceive for a long time, Mayamma advises her that she waited ten years for a son and to undergo penance to turn the wheel of fate: “Pray, pray, Devi. Tell the beads till your fingers are calloused and numb with exhaustion. Sit between five fires in a grove of penance for the sake of your unborn son (93-94). As a woman’s honour is doubled at the birth of a son, who is supposed to be the carrier of his father’s name to the future, women too desire sons. Devi’s and Mayamma’s life in the novel are alike. Both suffer from their marriage life and problems in motherhood. Devi feels embarrassed by the “official reference” (91) to her sex life and she loses all hopes for living when Mahesh refuses to adopt a child. While Devi leaves Mahesh, she feels bold as a heroine but she realises that the time has come to leave Gopal otherwise she would be drifting between worlds. She throws the peacock coloured sari that she tied over the mirror to cover the images that reflected the surroundings



to which she no longer wishes to belong. Her leaving the sari behind shows that she no longer wants the memories of the past to be carried in to the future as she wants to start life in a new way.

From ancient time onwards, daughters were conventionally brought up to believe that their parents' home was a temporary abode and it was the husband's house that needs to be considered as their own home. Once married, they were treated as visitors, when they visit their parents. In the novel, it is the oppressive mother as a social figure in a patriarchal setup that makes Devi question herself. In the end Devi challenges the dictate of patriarchal system and empower herself by giving a new meaning to the mother daughter relationship. After Devi leaves Gopal, she enters her mother's house in Madras, hear the faint sounds of a veena, "hesitant and childlike, inviting her into the house" (139). The mind or deepest thought of Indian women is generally influenced by violent powers that control unfairly her acceptance and admittance of defeat. Devi was blind folded into marriage like Gandhari but defiant in protest like Amba. Within the social structure of the male oriented society, Devi cannot define her identity, that is, as wife under an arranged marriage with Mahesh or even as a rebellious lover with Gopal. The novelist exploits the rich reservoir of Indian collective consciousness by peeping into the psyche of mythical characters - specially the women victims. She tries to draw an analogy between contemporary and mythical figures. She further states that this Mahabharata is narrated from the feminine perspective telling not of Karna, Arjun or Bhima but of Gandhari and Amba. In the contemporary world there are only two clear cut slots women can fit. One leads to sanyaas in a spirit of resignation and fatalism; the other a full-time housewife. Mayamma and Parvatamma chose the first: Sita opted for the second - "blameless wife" (101). But Devi finds herself "in between, around, on the edges of all circles" (73).

The trials and sufferings of Hariharan's women are same, but their attitude and reaction is entirely different. The society too began to realize the role of women in social changes. The educated protagonists try to assert their individuality and make an attempt to lead a liberal life. They fight endless battles to survive in the society. When women try to overcome their disadvantages, the invisible conflict between the male and the female bond becomes visible. The pativrata concept and the ritualistic role of women as goddess have kept them in chains. The pity is that the western countries are no better in providing a respectable position for women with all the claims of modernity. As Ferguson puts it: "Possessiveness in men is associated with protectiveness and responsibility, in women with narrowness and selfishness; self-sacrifice in men is marveled at, taken for granted in women" (7). The priority given to tradition, culture and status, holds back women from turning into a new leaf in their lives. Thus women's lives in cages begin to flourish and attain self-consciousness and individuality by overcoming the customs, believes and traditions of the society.

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